

Sailor recalls Pearl Harbor

By GLENN S. BECKHAM
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As the sun rose over Oahu that Sunday morning, it looked like the dawning of another beautiful day in a Pacific paradise for Seaman 1st Class Jacob F. "Jack" Chassereau Jr.

Even though Chassereau had pulled the last watch and had been up since 3 a.m., his spirits were high because at noon he was leaving his ship, the Oklahoma, and heading into nearby Honolulu.

All he had left to do after breakfast was join the other six members of his gunnery gang on the second level deck to perform some maintenance on their 5-inch, 25-caliber antiaircraft gun. Then he'd be free.

Chassereau vividly recalls the events that followed:

"By the time we got ready to start work on the gun, I heard this chatter of machine guns, and I looked up and this torpedo plane was coming in. He dropped his fish (torpedo), and I ducked behind one of the gun shields.

"As the plane started upward and banked, this joker in the back seat of the cockpit swerved around with his rotating turret and was pouring it on with his machine gun and gave us a fit. He got a ration of us, now. I could see his teeth!"

Chassereau remained behind the shield while the other planes continued to pour in, and he distinctly remembers seven terrific explosions. Some government accounts state that the Oklahoma took as many as nine direct torpedo hits.

"I thought there would never be an end to it," exclaimed Chassereau, who adds, "Every time a torpedo would hit, the old ship would go up and come down. Every time, she would go down a little further. Up and down."

Within 10 minutes, the 35,000-ton battlewagon had rolled over — capsized with a 1,300-man crew aboard.

Chassereau continues the chronology of events: "As she slowly capsized, we crawled on our bellies across the deck and through the passages to the starboard side. As we got over there, the lines and cables were popping and snapping, and that killed quite a few guys."

Chassereau explained that as the big ship rolled, they were finally able to ease down to the stabilizer, a big metal fin located on each side of the ship's hull below the water line. The stabilizers ran from bow to stern, and their primary purpose was to keep the ship from rolling too much.

"I didn't want to jump because I was afraid I might hit that and break my back or bust my head open. Once reaching the stabilizer, however, I had enough room to maneuver and was able to go on into the water."

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A HERO'S HISTORY

Jacob F. "Jack" Chassereau Jr.

BORN: April 9, 1921, Charleston
ENLISTED: July 11, 1940, U.S. Navy
RETIRED: Aug. 1, 1960

JACOB CHASSEREAU

Chassereau was now in the water between the capsized Oklahoma and the battleship Maryland, which was berthed next to Ford Island. He recalls that he and all the men with him "were hollering for the guys on the USS Maryland to throw some lines over. We had one life boat, but we swamped that."

Finally able to grab a rope, Chassereau pulled himself up onto the blister on the side of the Maryland. Blisters were tanks on the sides of battleships filled with water to absorb some of the concussion from the blow if the ship were hit by a torpedo.

Chassereau recounts that by now he was exhausted and laid there to catch his breath. This was short-lived, however, as another round of planes came over bombing and strafing. Jack's adrenaline quickly kicked back in, and he was back on the rope, finally reaching the main deck of the Maryland, where he went down a hatch and started handling ammunition.

Many other men of the Oklahoma swam around the stern or bow of the Maryland and were able to make it to Ford Island. Some were not so fortunate, however, as their strength gave out.

Chassereau reflects back on his shipmates who never had a chance as the attack came — the guys who were down within the lower decks. He explains that "as the ship rolled over and the top structures struck the bottom, severe structural damage resulted. The steel warped, and many hatches could not be opened."

The Oklahoma lost 415 men that morning, the second-greatest casualty rate of any of the 96 ships at Pearl Harbor that day. More than 1,000 men are entombed in the Arizona.

"When I was between the USS Maryland and the USS Oklahoma, I never will forget it when the Arizona blew," Chassereau said.

The Arizona had absorbed one 800-kilogram armor-piercing bomb before a high-level bomber dropped another, which penetrated the battleship's forward powder magazine. The result was a tremendous explosion that sent the ship to the bottom before the battle was 15 minutes old.

Back on the Maryland, meanwhile, Chassereau heard over the public address system that the ship was going to attempt to cast off. He and a buddy quickly decided to take their chance on Ford Island and proceeded to the stern on the main deck, where they leaped back into the water.

"But," Chassereau exclaims, "I went from the frying pan into the fire. They stopped bombing the ships and went after Ford Island with their high-level bombers. This was the second wave. They slaughtered us, but I was lucky."

By not being in the middle of the island, Chassereau was able to creep back to the water's edge. He didn't want to get back into the water, either, because by now it was laden with oil. There was nowhere to go and nothing to do but hunker down. The noise level and concussions he experienced were tremendous.

After what seemed like several hours, Chassereau recalls the gradual return of order out of the chaos. The crewmen were reuniting with each other, and speaker systems were set up to issue orders.

It also was during this time that all of the men were hustling to water's edge, helping to load the many casualties aboard launches to take them to the naval hospital.

Finally, Chassereau and about 150 to 200 other men from the Oklahoma were told to board a motor launch that was going to take them to west Loch, which he later found out was an ammunition depot controlled by the Marines.

Mercifully, Dec. 7, 1941, had finally come to a close for the thousands of men and women who survived that "day of infamy."

For the next 10 days, Chassereau would remain at west Loch, "handling ammunition day and night with little food, while sleeping on concrete decks using your shoes as a pillow."

Finally, the men were assigned to various other ships. Chassereau's new home would be the heavy cruiser Louisville, and he would again help man one of the 5-inch antiaircraft guns during the next two years in the Pacific Theater.

It has been 55 years now since that day that changed the world, and Jack Chassereau will tell you that certain memories have begun to fade. But if he were to live for another 75 years, it is doubtful he would ever forget most of the experiences he endured on the day the Japanese came and took his home and friends away.

Chassereau enjoys talking about the "32 who came back." After the attack, tapping sounds were heard coming from inside the bulkhead of the overturned Oklahoma. A rescue team was organized and frantically drilled and cut away at the hull. Within the following 30 hours, 32 trapped sailors saw daylight again. No more tapping was heard after that.

In concluding the Pearl Harbor experience, Chassereau makes an interesting observation: "I'll tell you one thing, if that battle fleet would have been out in the deep blue, outside of Pearl, there wouldn't have been a ship left. They would have wiped us all out!"

"We had nothing to fight with. The Japs had so many planes and outnumbered us so, they could have torpedoed us before we could have shot down half a dozen of them. A lot of people have never thought about that."

"If we had been out there, we would have been sitting ducks — we would all have been gone."

After his assignment to the Louisville, Chassereau could now experience some offense in the war. The ship escorted transports of Marines to Samoa and struck the Marshall and Gilbert islands.

Then, in August 1942, Guadalcanal broke loose. He just missed the bitter defeat of Savo Island, where four heavy cruisers were sunk and one was damaged.

Lady Luck still looked down on Chassereau, however. After they took in tow the crippled cruiser Chicago, it was sunk and his ship, the Louisville, was struck by a torpedo, but it proved to be a dud.

The next day, two destroyers and a tug went down, and the Louisville was ordered to vacate the area. Chassereau remained at sea a full year before finally returning to Pearl for R and R — rest and recuperation.

In early 1944, the Navy wanted recruits for new construction, so Chassereau volunteered and was assigned to the Oak Hill. This was

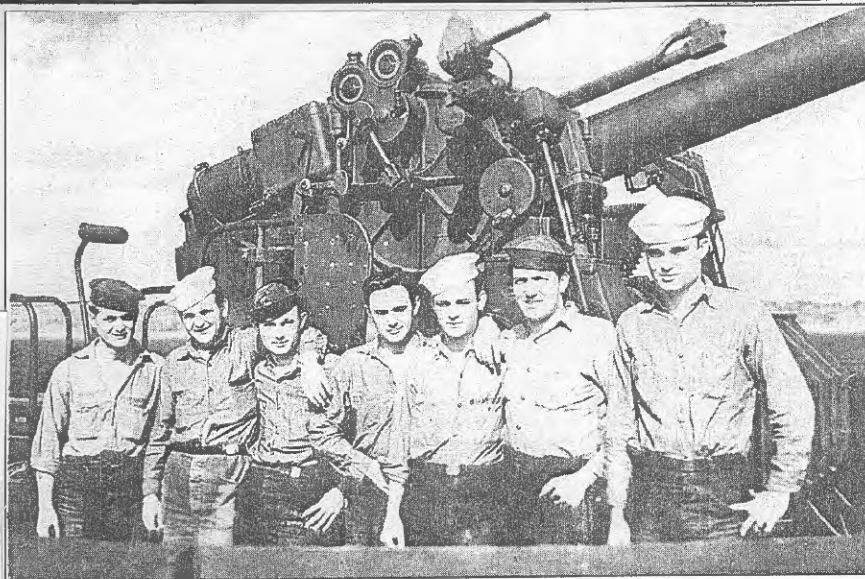


Photo Provided

A 1944 photograph shows the seven-man gun crew assigned to one of the 5-inch anti-aircraft guns on the USS Oak Hill (LSD7). Jack Chassereau is second from the right.

the seventh LSD, or landing ship dock, which was a floating dry dock and transport.

While on the Oak Hill, he participated in most of the Pacific campaigns, such as the Philippines, Peleliu, Iwo Jima and Okinawa, where he was stationed for five months.

While at Okinawa, Chassereau witnessed the constant kamikaze attacks on the U.S. fleet and endured the nightly visits of Japanese Betty Bombers, which the forces could hear coming but could never see. Their only defense was to make lots of smoke to obscure their position.

Chassereau likes to claim that he was on the first U.S. ship to sink during World War II and on the last ship attacked during World War II. The attack came in mid-1945 when the Oak Hill was making a solo run from Okinawa to Honolulu.

During this trip a Japanese submarine fired a one-man torpedo at them.

This was a suicide mission — the torpedo was actually manned by someone on a one-way trip.

The Oak Hill crew saw it coming, but it exploded prior to arrival. Chassereau is not sure if his gun crew shot it or if the torpedo exploded prematurely.

Chassereau feels that men in the Pacific Theater withstood the pressure due to youth, guts and wanting revenge for the Pearl Harbor attack.

After the war, Chassereau stayed on and put in his 20 years with the Navy, retiring in 1960. He spent the next 24 years at the Naval Supply Center in Charleston. He married his wife, Annie, in 1949, and they live in the West Ashley area. They have a son, a daughter and eight grandchildren.

Glenn S. Beckham is a Charleston freelance writer and history buff who believes the stories of World War II veterans should be told to honor the sacrifices they made.